

(U) Ask Zelda!: Stalled in the Ladies Room

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) The below column is unclassified in its entirety.



Zelda, I am disabled and use a walker and, when I can, a cane. I have to use the handicapped stall in the ladies' room. More and more I have run into the situation that the stall is occupied by someone who is changing clothes or who does not appear to have a disability. (I realize that all disabilities are not visible. However, when someone exits at full tilt in uber high heels, it begs the question.) It is painful for me to have to wait what seems to be an interminable amount of time. I sometimes hear an "I'm sorry," but most often, the stall usurper breezes by as if nothing is wrong. Any suggestions?

Signed,
Didn't You Momma Teach You Better?

Dear "Yo' Momma,"

I have a feeling my response is not exactly what you're looking for, but I will take this opportunity to expound on the subject, because... well, that's what I do!

I must caveat this advice by saying I am speaking only as Zelda. I do not know what the Americans with Disabilities Act, Disability Affairs organization, General Counsel, or even bathroom manufacturers have to say about the rules for stall usage in this situation.

My Understanding/View of Things

Whenever possible, the handicap-accessible stall should be kept free for people with wheelchairs, walkers, etc. who need handrails or more room to maneuver. If there are empty standard stalls, people without special needs should fill those first. However, if all the stalls are full except for the handicap (HC) one, **there is no need for them to wait for a standard one to become free**--they may use the HC stall.

Sometimes people without disabilities also need a larger stall: mothers with a child in a stroller or a traveler with a suitcase or laptop she doesn't want to leave unattended in the outer portion of a public restroom, for example. This group could include people changing clothes--especially when the regular stalls are tiny and have an automatic flush sensor that is set off by the slightest movement. Are these people entitled to use the HC stall?

I believe they are. The HC stalls are there to assist a certain population, but are not restricted to that population the way HC parking spots are.

Patience and Courtesy

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Sometimes, especially in the ladies room, there is a line for the stalls. Unfortunately, the HC stall is not your personal toilet; you have to share, and you may have to wait.

Lest you think I'm unsympathetic, I want to remind those non-disabled bathroom-goers to keep the HC stall free, whenever possible; and if you must use it, try to be quick. It is never OK to hang out in the HC stall reading a newspaper or treating it like your cubicle-away-from-cubicle. If you emerge from one to find a disabled person waiting, it's always nice to thank them for their patience or apologize for tying it up. And if there is a line for a stall, it would be polite to allow the disabled person to "jump the line" the next time the HC stall becomes free.

I would also urge "Yo' Momma," if there is a line, to explain your situation and ask anyone in front of you if it would be OK for you to go ahead of them when the HC stall opens up. I'm sure most people would be very supportive of your needs, and it might not occur to them to offer.

Things aren't always what they seem

Regarding the able-bodied stall usurper, it's possible that all the standard stalls were in use when she entered the restroom, and that the other stalls emptied before you got there--making it seem as if she had a choice and chose the larger stall when she didn't need it.

I understand that it can be painful for a disabled person to have to wait for a stall to open up; but perhaps no more painful than waiting for a free stall when you've drunk a venti cappuccino and then sat through an hour-long staff meeting!

Eddis
